

# Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2007  
WWW.USDOJ.GOV

OPA  
(202) 514-2008  
TDD (202) 514-1888

**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE STEPS UP EFFORTS TO INVESTIGATE**  
**FRAUD ALLEGATIONS IN WILDFIRE RELIEF EFFORTS**  
***Public Can Report Fire-Related Fraud at 1-800-CALLFBI***

WASHINGTON – The Justice Department is stepping up efforts to investigate allegations of fraud and is sending a warning that it will vigorously prosecute those who illegally obtain federal relief in the Southern California region, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher and U.S. Attorneys Thomas O'Brien (Central District) and Karen P. Hewitt (Southern District) announced today.

Alice S. Fisher, Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Division, said: "Those who engage in fraud schemes for their own financial gain during a time of disaster will be vigorously investigated and prosecuted. The Department of Justice is committed to ensuring that the aid coming to Southern California makes it into the hands of those who have lost so much in these wildfires."

Karen P. Hewitt, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of California, said: "All of San Diego County has been affected by these devastating wildfires. Federal aid needs to be made available quickly to those individuals who qualify to receive it so that they can begin to rebuild their lives. When any person intentionally submits a false claim for federal relief, it impedes the ability of federal disaster relief officials to ensure that prompt financial aid be given to the people who qualify for it. If we learn of any false federal claims for aid as a result of the California wildfires, the United States Attorney's Office in San Diego will vigorously prosecute those people who illegally attempt to profit from this disaster." The Southern District of California serves the counties of San Diego and Imperial.

Thomas P. O'Brien, the United States Attorney for the Central District of California, stated: "With many thousands of people displaced by the fires, federal aid will provide assistance in rebuilding lives. Unfortunately, past experience shows that some individuals will take advantage of the goodwill that is funded with taxpayers' money. Those unscrupulous individuals will be targeted for criminal prosecution, no matter how small the fraud perpetrated." The Central District of California serves the counties of Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Luis Obispo, Ventura and Santa Barbara.

The Southern California region has been declared a Federal disaster area, which qualifies the region for federal funds related to the relief efforts following the wildfires. Recent history involving disasters such as Hurricanes Ivan, Wilma and Katrina and the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks has shown that some criminals seek to profit from calamities by means of fraudulent schemes. The Department of Justice will utilize its existing infrastructure and relationships developed through the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force to investigate those who try to take advantage of the relief efforts in the Southern California wildfire.

The Department of Justice is committed to tracking referrals of potential cases and complaints, coordinating with law enforcement agencies to initiate investigations, matching referrals with the appropriate U.S. Attorney's offices, and ensuring timely and effective prosecution of any potential fraud cases. Examples of recent types of fraud related to relief efforts include:

Fraudulent Charities: Cases in which individuals falsely hold themselves out as agents of legitimate charities, or create "charities" that are in fact shams;  
Identity Theft: Cases in which the identities of innocent victims are "stolen" and assumed by criminals who convert the assets of, or otherwise defraud, the victims;  
Insurance Fraud: Cases in which false or inflated insurance claims are filed; and  
Government Benefit Fraud: Cases in which individuals file false applications seeking benefits to which they are not entitled.

Several resources are available to obtain information about, and report instances of, fire-related fraud. Members of the public can call the FBI at 1-800-CALLFBI to report instances of fraud or report online on the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center at [www.ic3.gov](http://www.ic3.gov).

The Fraud Section of the Criminal Division maintains additional information about internet-related scams at [www.internetfraud.usdoj.gov](http://www.internetfraud.usdoj.gov). The Federal Trade Commission provides additional information at its website, [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov), and a toll-free FTC hotline, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357, TTY/TDD: 202-326-2502), also allows consumers to report suspected schemes to defraud.

###